THE MISANTHROPE OF MOLIÈRE

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THE MISANTHROPE

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OF
MOLIÈRE

Done into English by
WILLIAM F. GIESE

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FOREWORD

Benevolent Reader,

Grant me, I pray, a brief moment of speech with thee, not indeed that I may forestall, but that I may mitigate thy censure, inevitable, I fear me, in any case. For inasmuch as every translator must needs substitute his own base counterfeit for the pure gold of his author, how, if he get his deserts, shall he 'scape castigation? If he be timid and sit upon thorns lest he bewray his text, shall he not, by too closely barring the door upon his own liberty, incur the sure imputation of a tame and slavish literalness? And, on the other hand, if he make bold at a pinch now and then to foist in some of his own home-brewed stuff among his master's braver inventions, shall he not fall under the ferule for his unmannerly license? Blame me rather then, since blame me thou must, for this latter, and, as I hold, lesser fault in those of our apish tribe; yet remember in thy displeasure that I did but incur it for thy pleasure. What is in sooth the head and front of my offending? Wherein do I seem wantonly to have o'erstepped the bounds set for those of my modest craft? If thou beest churlish, thou mayest indeed bring me to book for a whole litany of sins. Yet would I humbly beg thee to note that I have for every separate sin a separate excuse to oppose to thy adversation. I have, I avow it, striven to make the moody lover Alceste a jot more dignified and less open to thy ready laughter than his maker mayhap intended him. Aye, but if I did, it was only that he might thus the better win thy suffrage by

reminding thee of thy beloved hero, the noble prince Hamlet, whom he so much resembleth. Likewise I have made his lady at times a little more soft-spoken and insinuating. True again, but this also was from a laudable fear lest thou find her Gallic self a little too strange for thy affection, if not for thy admiration. Even so have I made the shrewd yet kindly Philinte and the gentle Eliante a shade more sentimental after our own tenderer English fashion — this, too, only the more surely to enshrine them in thy love. Similarly, reprobate not the gallant carpet-knights if they appear a little more given to pretty conceits and euphuistic turns, nor yet disparage the clowns if they seem more palpably clownish than their prototypes — hast thou not a hundred times applauded to the echo in the old plays thou dost most affect the gallants and the clowns who ever fall into these same extravagancies? And finally, and without further ambagious ramblings, I come now to the chief scandal of all, to the very lion in my path, *mea maxima culpa:* I have, so thou mayest charge me, drifted obliquely away from the inimitable naturalness and noble sobriety of my author's manner and have, in my foolhardiness, sought to make him more adorned and lyrical! It is even so; I have indulged in a little romantic finery, and have, as I hope, in a not wholly unpleasing fashion, stuck in here and there a stray sprig of eglantine or hawthorn from my own homely garden to set off the barrenness of my poor rhymes. But forget not, I pray thee, that this license, like the precedent ones, has no other drift than to accommodate my matter to thy native taste and to those sweet prejudices and cherished predilections that a confirmed lover of the great Will cannot but bring with him to the reading of any rival poet

clad in English garb. For full surely if thou canst with a ready delight peruse this most agreeable divertisement in the original numbers, thou wilt not mistakenly turn away from the incomparable Molière to spend thy time with his most zealous yet all-too insufficient interpreter,

W. F. G.

THE MISANTHROPE

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

ALCESTE, *the misanthrope, suitor of* CÉLIMÈNE
PHILINTE, *his friend*
ORONTE, *rival of* ALCESTE
CLITANDER, } *coxcomb courtiers,*
ACASTE, } *rivals of* ALCESTE
BASQUE, *a footman*
DUBOIS, ALCESTE'S *valet*
A GUARD

CÉLIMÈNE, *the coquette*
ELIANTE, *cousin of* CÉLIMÈNE
ARSINOE, *the prude*

SCENE: The salon of Célimène.

THE MISANTHROPE

ACT I

PHILINTE AND ALCESTE

PHILINTE

Come, why so hot, Alceste?

ALCESTE

Leave me, I say!

PHILINTE

But why this groundless anger, tell me, pray?

ALCESTE

Leave me, sir, I repeat. Out of my sight!

PHILINTE

Come, don't be angry. Listen! Is it right . . .

ALCESTE

I will be angry, and won't listen! Zounds!

PHILINTE

Be calm, Alceste, and do not chafe your wounds.
Though I'm your friend, — I vow, this strange disease . . .

ALCESTE

You are my friend no longer, if you please!
The bond is snapped that held through many a year;
When in your soul such ugly blots appear
I tell you outright you and I must part:
I want no place in a corrupted heart.

PHILINTE

What are these ugly blots on my fair fame?

ALCESTE

Go to, sir; you should die for very shame!
Heaven holds no pardon for such monstrous deeds,
And every honest heart that sees them bleeds!
You meet a random passer, you caress him
Straightway, you grasp him, clasp him, press him, bless him;
You bow and scrape, you flatter and cajole,
And swear you're his forever, heart and soul;
Yet, once he's gone, your hot zeal grows so tame,
Your love so cool, that if I ask his name
You hem and haw — you really can't recall —
You've scarcely heard his name three times in all!
Just Heaven! It's base, it's vile, it's infamous
To fawn, to lie, and to dissemble thus!
And if, unhappily, I'd done the same,
I'd go and hang myself to hide my shame.

PHILINTE

Come, come! This is no hangable offense;
I read the statutes in a different sense;

And, spite the violence of your decrees,
I do not mean to hang yet, if you please.

ALCESTE

Who cannot reason answers with a gibe.

PHILINTE

Who cannot reason lets his friends prescribe.

ALCESTE

Agreed! let men be true and play no part,
And let the lips be heralds to the heart.

PHILINTE

What! if some friend embraces me with passion,
Shall I not pay him in the self-same fashion,
Treat his advances as transcendent matters,
Praise when he praises, flatter when he flatters?

ALCESTE

No! I denounce this mercenary code
That 'mong your modish people is the mode;
There's naught I hate more than the vile grimaces
Of these same flatterers with their smiling faces
Who always greet you with wide-outstretched arms,
Who find your thoughts all wise, your speech all charms,
And with strained courtesies that never cool
O'erwhelm alike the wise man and the fool.
What does it profit me to find a friend
Who swears faith, zeal, esteem, love without end,

And lauds my virtue with a tender touch,
If the first rogue may hear him say as much?
No honest soul, legitimately proud,
Will care for plaudits lavished on the crowd,
And finely tempered spirits stand averse
From praises shared by all the universe.
Esteem is founded upon preference:
A common love offends my common sense;
And since you share these vices of the age,
I give you up! It puts me in a rage
To see the vast indulgence of your heart
That gives to each and all an equal part.
I crave selection — on this note I end:
The friend of all mankind is not my friend.

PHILINTE

But in a world by forms and fashions swayed
Fair words received are with fair words repaid.

ALCESTE

No — I repeat — my choler overflows
At this vile trafficking in hollow shows.
Let men lay bare their thoughts, and in all places
Proclaim their inmost feelings in their faces;
Let the heart speak, and let no lying mask
Distort the simple truth — that's all I ask.

PHILINTE

But there are some occasions when pure truth
May be offensive, mischievous, uncouth!

And now and then — rail as you will — we ought
With timely speech to veil untimely thought.
Would it be wise or decent, when we doubt
A friend's good faith, to blurt that feeling out?
If we dislike a man, or think him base,
Vile, loathsome, shall we say so — to his face?

ALCESTE

Yes!

PHILINTE

What! And would you dare, full jump,
To tell old Emily that she's a frump —
And how her paint and powder scandalize?

ALCESTE

I would!

PHILINTE

Or tell proud Dorilas it is not wise
To blazon his great blood, lest the whole court
Make him and all his ancestry their sport?

ALCESTE

I would!

PHILINTE

You jest.

ALCESTE

I do not. 'Tis my plan
Upon this point to spare no mortal man.

My soul is sickened. All the world's a stage
Where every act augments my towering rage.
For what is seen in all this motley throng
Of wrangling actors but triumphant wrong
Lording it over right, and mad unreason
Flattered and fed by roguery and treason?
'Tis past enduring! And from this time forth
I'll tell each knave and fool his proper worth!

PHILINTE

This frantic humor is too fierce by half,
And your wild outbursts only make me laugh.
Were friends by diverse tempers e'er so swayed?
We're like those brothers by Molière portrayed . . .

ALCESTE

I pray you, drop these stale similitudes.

PHILINTE

And I beseech you, shun these savage moods.
You cannot mend the world, whate'er you do,
And, since plain-speaking has such charms for you,
I'll plainly tell you that this crabbed spirit,
This railing at all forms that men inherit,
This bent to sourly moralize and mock,
Makes you of town and court the laughing-stock.

ALCESTE

By Heaven! I would not have it otherwise!
Such laughter is approval in disguise.

Let the world laugh! I laugh at it in turn,
I court its scorn, and its good-will I spurn.

PHILINTE

I crave selection. You condemn pell-mell.

ALCESTE

All! All! I hate them like the gates of hell.

PHILINTE

What! All poor mortals, all, from best to worst,
Without one sole exception stand accursed?
Still there are some even in this sorry age . . .

ALCESTE

No, all are damned — mine is a general rage!
I hate all men; some for their scurvy ways,
And some because these scurvy rogues they praise,
And never feel those wrathful tempests roll
That vice should waken in a virtuous soul.
See with what ease the party to my suit,
Despite his crimes, keeps his usurped repute!
Through his false mask men see the rascal's face,
And his true self is known in every place.
His upturned eyes and his mellifluous speeches
Discredit all the virtues that he preaches.
All know the rogue's so conversant with evil
To gain his ends he'd bargain with the devil;
His courtiers love his titles, power, and pelf,
But where's the man who loves the wretch himself?
Call him a knave, accuse, revile, convict,

All will agree, and none will contradict;
They know by what vile arts he made his way,
And all his vices are as plain as day;
And yet this fellow's welcomed in all houses,
With town and court he hobnobs and carouses,
And every golden honor in the state
Becomes the booty of this reprobate.
By Heaven! I vow it cuts me to the quick
That vice should find us grown so politic.
Fie on this world! It fills me with such rage
I long to flee into a hermitage.

PHILINTE

Come, come — let's not disparage poor mankind;
They are not all, nor wholly, mad and blind,
Nor are they wholly wicked. The true sage
Surveys them with an equitable rage,
And strives with lenience to conciliate
His high ideal with their mortal state.
His ripened wisdom is not exigent,
And asking much with little is content.
The time's grown mild; rigor is out of date,
We quote salvation at a cheaper rate;
We know the world; we know that men are men,
And that even women stumble — now and then.
In short, it is the acme of all folly
To wish to mend mankind. 'Tis melancholy
Daily to see a hundred horrid things
That might be heavenly — if men sprouted wings;
And yet, although I wish them otherwise,
I view them without anger or surprise;

I take them as they are; I cannot change them:
Then why with grumbling diatribes estrange them?
Nay, nay — all men of sense in court and town
Cry up my calm and cry your fury down.

ALCESTE

And would it hold — this calm — if you should find
Your friends turned traitors? or your foes combined
To filch your pockets, blast your reputation,
And paint yourself a scandal to the nation?

PHILINTE

Yes, truly; for these vices that misfeature
The limpid crystalline of human nature
Are nature's livery. Why should we grieve
If woman play us false, if man deceive?
Nature that bids the wolf devour the lamb,
That self-same nature made me what I am.
She fashioned man and beast. How slight the span
That severs monkey, vulture, wolf, from man!

ALCESTE

What! shall I see myself betrayed, robbed, bilked,
And stand here patient as a cow that's milked!
No more! — by Heaven! you argue like a fool.

PHILINTE

I'll say no more. I beg you to keep cool,
To be by random feelings less distraught
And give your suit some portion of your thought.

ALCESTE

Think of my suit! I tell you I will not!

PHILINTE

Come! who shall be the pleaders of your cause?

ALCESTE

My pleaders? Reason — justice — and the laws!

PHILINTE

And don't you mean to grease their wheels a little?

ALCESTE

No! Is my case so weak? my right so brittle?

PHILINTE

By no means; yet intrigue may turn the scale.

ALCESTE

I lean on justice: if it fails, I fail.
I stand upon my right.

PHILINTE

Don't trust to that!

ALCESTE

I will not budge!

PHILINTE

Beware! This acrobat
May overleap the laws.

ALCESTE

I do not care.

PHILINTE

You'll lose your case. Once more I say: Beware!

ALCESTE

I will not — I will sooner lose my suit.

PHILINTE

Come, come!

ALCESTE

I'll see if wrong so absolute . . .

PHILINTE

But, sir . . .

ALCESTE

I'll make probation in this case
Whether the age we live in is so base,
And labors under so malign a curse,
'Twill wrong me in the eyes o' the universe.

PHILINTE

O foolish wrath!

ALCESTE

I care not what it cost,
I'll test it, though my suit be ten times lost.

PHILINTE

Be calm, be calm! If men could hear but half
Of your wild words, how loudly they would laugh!

ALCESTE

My curse light on the laughers!

PHILINTE

Come, Alceste —
Let me submit you to a different test.
You harp on virtue, honor, truth — and yet
Do you not worship a confirmed coquette?
How does it come that you, who darkly frown
On the whole human race and set them down
As fools and villains all, still from that race
Choose for your adoration one fair face?
Why does your rigorous judgment not forswear
A fair face coupled with a heart unfair?
Eliante, a lady beauteous, pure, and good,
Smiles on you; so too does that haughty prude
Arsinoe — yet you let these fond ones sigh,
And only Célimène can draw your eye.
Do you admire in her those horrid crimes
And scandals that you censure in the times?
Do you condone, when harbored in her breast,
The faults that elsewhere make your soul protest?
Are they no longer faults in one so fair?
Or do you only see them otherwhere?

ALCESTE

No — by my faith — those foibles others see
In her I love — ah! how they torture me!

Yes, even when they harbor in her breast,
I see those blots that elsewhere I detest.
And yet, 'tis true, I cannot quite despair,
Whate'er her faults — she is so heavenly fair!
I see them, I deplore them, but in vain!
I chide, I melt; I scold, yet love again;
And love condones and cancels all. I trust
Love will redeem her sins — it can — it must!

PHILINTE

God speed you! That would be a nine days' wonder.
Think you she loves you truly?

ALCESTE

May Heaven's thunder
Impugn me if I doubt — I *know* she loves me!

PHILINTE

But, if you can avouch her constancy,
Why does the fear of rivals fret your heart?

ALCESTE

Ah! 'tis the very trick of love to start
At every half-heard sound, and quake with fear
If even a rival's shadow fall too near.
Therefore I mean this day to fix a date
To hopes and fears and learn from her my fate.

PHILINTE

Ah me! if I to-day the wooer were,
I'd woo fair Eliante instead of her.

Her nature's gentle, and slow-moving time
Has smoothed it to perfection. What sweet rhyme
Could rhyme her sweetness, or what tongue recite
That patient love that would outwatch the night
And sing the stars to sleep — such constancy
Dwells in the holy quiet of her eye!
Perchance, hid in that heart so pure, so true,
Gleams the rare pearl of happiness — for you.

ALCESTE

My judgment echoes yours — and yet — 'tis fated;
For when were love and judgment ever mated?
Your fears and doubts fill me with melancholy,
But reason never yet ruled lover's folly.

PHILINTE

I would this day by an auspicious end
Might crown your love . . .

[ORONTE *enters*]

ORONTE

Good sir, behold a friend!
Excuse me, if I take you unawares.
The ladies being gone, I've climbed the stairs
To speak to you at once. You cannot dream
The warmth and altitude of my esteem,
And this esteem, this zeal, this love inspires
The first, last, greatest of all my desires, —
To be your friend! My heart, charmed by your merit,
And by the thousand graces you inherit,
Trusts you will love me in your turn, and feel

How true a friend I am — and how genteel.

[*During this speech* ALCESTE *remains dreamily absorbed, as if unaware that he is being addressed. He becomes attentive only when* ORONTE *resumes.*

They are for you — sir — all these eulogies.

ALCESTE

For me, sir?

ORONTE

Aye — they surely can't displease?

ALCESTE

Oh, no! Yet, sir, I scarcely can believe
My ears — so great the honor I receive!

ORONTE

By such esteem you scarce can be surprised,
Whose worth by all the world is recognized.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

There's no office in the state
That for your golden merit is too great.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

So supreme your worth, your rivals all
Seem but pale copies, you th' original.

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

May the lightning blast me if I speak
One word I do not think! Now on your cheek
Let me imprint the seal of amity:
Call me your friend from this day forth, and be
The brother of my soul. Your promise — quick!
You'll be my friend?

ALCESTE

Sir . . .

ORONTE

Sure, you do not stick
At swearing . . .

ALCESTE

Sir, you honor me, indeed;
But friendship does not shoot up like a weed;
And men profane its sacred name and nature
Who sanction every random candidature.
It is a compact made with care and choice.
Friendship — and love — should wait on reason's voice;
And we might rue it on some later day
If we too quickly give our hearts away.

ORONTE

Gad, sir! you speak like a philosopher.
I love you all the more for't. Let's defer,
Since that's your pleasure, till some future hour

These friendly bonds. Meantime, if I have power
To serve your hopes at court, I'm wholly yours, —
Yours, sir, to make all kinds of overtures.
The King consults me, heeds me, is my friend,
And I have hopes, plans, prospects without end.
Do not forget: I'm yours unto the death!
And, knowing all your skill and your good faith,
To seal our bond I now will bid you sit
In judgment on a sonnet I have writ.

ALCESTE

Sir, that's a task too hard for my poor wit;
I beg off . . .

ORONTE

Why?

ALCESTE

I lack the skill to feign;
And, if a thing mislikes me, I'm too plain.

ORONTE

The very thing I crave! You would do wrong
To make black white, to bracket weak and strong,
To call bad verses good — or good ones bad.

ALCESTE

Since you insist, why, sir, I shall be glad . . .

ORONTE

A sonnet ('tis a sonnet), *Hope* — you see
It's for a lady that had smiled on me:

Hope — 'tis not high-flown, pompous, swelling verse,
But tender rhyme, sweet, languorous — and terse.

ALCESTE

We'll see, sir . . .

ORONTE

Hope — I hope my polished ease
And gentlemanly melody may please,
And that my choice of words will hit your taste.

ALCESTE

We'll see, sir.

ORONTE

Anyhow, I wrote in haste;
Gad, sir, it scarcely took a half-hour's time.

ALCESTE

Haste, sir, makes waste; slow time builds lofty rhyme.

ORONTE

[*Recites.*]

Hope, I account thee but a fount
Of mingled joy and sorrow;
Thy waters mount, recede, remount,
Bubbling to-day and dry to-morrow.

PHILINTE

A rare beginning! witty, every line!

ALCESTE

[*Aside.*] Rare! Witty! Tell him — do — that it's divine!

ORONTE

Phyllis, before your lips forswore
The love I bore, you murmured, 'Yes';
Unless still more you hold in store,
Than heretofore, why acquiesce?

PHILINTE

How gallantly you hint at her rebuff.

ALCESTE

[*Aside.*] What! do you praise this namby-pamby stuff?

ORONTE

In this lorn state if I must wait,
I'll antedate my destined fate,
This mortal coil untying;
So negative the hope you give!
So fugitive! — why should I live
Still sighing, crying, dying?

PHILINTE

Ah! how enchanting! What a dying fall!

ALCESTE

[*Aside.*] Plague take you, sycophant! I would this scrawl,
This gimcrack, gibble-gabble, choke-pear sonnet,
Stuck in your throat, that you might strangle on it!
A dying fall, forsooth!

PHILINTE

'Tis full of matter,
Of pith, of fire, of style . . .

ORONTE

I fear you flatter!

ALCESTE

[*Aside.*] Zounds!

PHILINTE

Faith, not I.

ALCESTE

[*Aside.*] Ha! traitor!

ORONTE

Well — no matter!
[*To* ALCESTE.] But you, sir, you have promised, without ruth,
In all sincerity, to tell the truth.

ALCESTE

It is a ticklish trade to criticize,
And only eulogists are counted wise.
Sir, one day to a friend whose name I hide,
That begged me judge his verses, I replied:
'A gentleman indeed may be a poet,
If he but screen the fact so none may know it,
Make rhymes in secret and secrete his rhymes
From past, from present, and from future times;

But, if he violate this golden rule,
The proudest gentleman may play the fool.'

ORONTE

And by rehearsing of this little chat
You mean to hint I'm wrong . . .

ALCESTE

I don't say that;
But I did say (to him) that frigid verse
To all who hear it is a baleful curse,
And one is damned by this criterion,
Though in all else he be a paragon.

ORONTE

I half suspect you do not like my sonnet,
And mean to pass an unkind judgment on it.

ALCESTE

I don't say that. I merely said, in brief,
That many an honest man thus comes to grief.

ORONTE

Do I, sir, lurk behind this pseudonym?

ALCESTE

I don't say that. But, sir, I said (to him),
Why this mad lust to fashion odes and strophes?
And why beset the printer with these trophies?
For making useless books a man can give
One sole excuse: he wrote that he might live.

Believe me, exorcise this silly passion,
Or if some sweating devil makes you fashion
Couplets and quatrains, hide from mortal sight,
'Neath triple bolts and bars, the stuff you write.
You are an honest man, and all men know it,
While not a soul suspects you are a poet;
Then why rush into print and let men scan
A worthless poet in the honest man?
Such were the truths I tried to make him see.

ORONTE

I see them perfectly, and quite agree.
But tell me, is there something in my sonnet . . . ?

ALCESTE

Sir, since again you ask my verdict on it,
It's downright bad! You've followed foolish models,
Who had no thought of nature in their noddles.
What means this line: *I count thee but a fount?*
Or this: *Thy waters mount, recede, remount?*
Or this: *In this lorn state if I must wait,*
I'll antedate my destined fate?
Or this: *So negative the hope you give!*
So fugitive! — why should I live . . . ?
Such flights of fancy travesty the heart:
Pure truth and feeling are the soul of art;
And all these far-fetched turns and glittering freaks
Are not the language simple nature speaks.
When whim is sovereign, judgment is displaced.
Our untaught fathers showed a finer taste,

And I prefer to all our tortuous rhymes
This simple ditty of the olden times:
[*He recites.*] If the king should say to me:
'Come, my lad, I'll give to thee
My great city, Paris' —
And instead would take away
Her whom I shall love alway,
That so sweet and fair is,
I would say: 'King Henry, nay,
Keep your city, Paris,
But take not my love away,
Her whom I shall love alway,
That so sweet and fair is.'
The rhymes are simple, and the style is plain;
But can't you see how true it is, how sane?
And how pure passion breathes in every line,
Mocking the modern verse men deem so fine?
[*He sings.*] If the king should say to me:
'Come, my lad, I'll give to thee
My great city, Paris' —
And instead would take away
Her whom I shall love alway,
That so sweet and fair is,
I would say: 'King Henry, nay,
Keep your city, Paris,
But take not my love away,
Her whom I shall love alway,
That so sweet and fair is.'
Such is the language that true love inspires;
Laugh, if you like, at artless passion's fires!
I tell you this old ballad's sweeter far
Than all your florid, jewelled verses are.

ORONTE

In any case, I know my sonnet's good.

ALCESTE

I'd say as much, sir, if I only could;
But since I can't, I beg you will permit
That I remain less spellbound by your wit.

ORONTE

Critics more apt find not a word to blot.

ALCESTE

They have the art of feigning — I have not.

ORONTE

Is wit so rare that you alone possess it?

ALCESTE

Is praise so cheap I must to you address it?

ORONTE

I'd gladly see, as samples of your wit,
On this same theme, some verses you had writ.

ALCESTE

They might be bad as yours, sir, but I swear
I'd hide 'em from the world with proper care.

ORONTE

I scorn your praise, sir, I can do without it.

ALCESTE

Indeed! Why then make all this stew about it?

ORONTE

I tell you, sir, I do not like your tone.

ALCESTE

Ah! but you should — it's modelled on your own.

ORONTE

My little sir, your language is too proud.

ALCESTE

My great sir, it shall not be disavowed.

PHILINTE

Good friends, you go too far — in Heaven's name . . .

ORONTE

You're right — I yield — I am indeed to blame.
[*To* ALCESTE.] Your valet, sir — until again we meet.

ALCESTE

Let me be yours — till then — sir, I entreat.
[*Exit* ORONTE.

PHILINTE

So, there you are! through being too sincere
You have a duel with this coxcomb here.
'Twas plain as day, three words of barren praise . . .

ALCESTE

Silence, I say! O these degenerate days!

PHILINTE

Come, come!

ALCESTE

Let me begone!

PHILINTE

Where?

ALCESTE

Nay — no more!
You drive me mad!

PHILINTE

But, sir . . .

ALCESTE

My soul is sore
Past curing!

PHILINTE

But . . .

ALCESTE

Don't dog my steps, I say!
I mean to flee this wicked world! Away!

[*Exit* ALCESTE.

PHILINTE

I will not leave you in this savage mood
To fret and sting your soul in solitude.

[*He follows* ALCESTE.

ACT II

CÉLIMÈNE AND ALCESTE

ALCESTE

Madam, I lack your skill at hide and seek,
To gloze my thought and soften what I speak;
I hate these giddy ways, this guileful art,
This liberal openness of house and heart,
And this high tide of amorous enterprise!
I should speak false did I speak otherwise:
I see it plainly, we shall break at last,
And our fond dream will be forever past.
No conjurations can forestall that hour,
Nor all my love oppose its fatal power.

CÉLIMÈNE

O courteous knight! was it for this, I pray,
You brought me home — to scold me all the way?

ALCESTE

I do not scold — but your free courtesy
Trails in its wake too much knight-errantry.
The lovers that beset you are too plenty;
I would be one of two; not one in twenty.

CÉLIMÈNE

But since I'm twenty, and reputed fair,
Must I reduce all lovers to despair?
Must I with brandished cudgel walk the floor,
And drive all my adorers from my door?

ALCESTE

'Tis not a cudgel, madam, that I preach,
But ears less eager for their honied speech.
I know you are the paragon of charm,
And love beholds you only to disarm;
But need you end the work those charms began
And levy amorous toll from every man?
Need the warm hopes your melting eyes inspire
Maintain as well as light this gallant fire?
Might not this large indulgence, less extended,
Behold this endless press of lovers ended?
Come, tell me, madam, by what happy spell
Your friend Clitander pleases you so well.
What hidden worth or what peculiar art
Has he that finds the pathway to your heart?
Is it that long nail on his little finger
That has seduced your eye? Does your soul linger
Enmeshed with all our beaux and belles in the big
And flaxen glories of his periwig?
Is it his streaming bands, his flowing coat,
Or the thick laugh that gurgles from his throat,
Or the broad cuffs that billow round his ankles,
That weave this charm? Upon my word, it rankles
My very soul to see this fawning knave
Dancing attendance on you like a slave.

CÉLIMÈNE

How stupid is this baseless jealousy!
I humor him — you know the reason why.
I use his zeal to serve my private ends;
To win my suit I need him and his friends.

ALCESTE

Then lose your suit, and, without more debate,
Cease playing with a rival that I hate.

CÉLIMÈNE

Is there a man whom you do not suspect?

ALCESTE

Is there a man whose homage you reject?

CÉLIMÈNE

Favor so widely spread cannot last long,
Nor strike deep roots; you know the good old song,
Safety in numbers; you would have more reason
To fear one flame than twenty in a season.

ALCESTE

For which of all the twenty do you care?
What favor have I which they do not share?

CÉLIMÈNE

The bliss of knowing you alone are loved.

ALCESTE

'Tis sweetly said, but I would see it proved.

CÉLIMÈNE

Is't not enough, my Alceste, to have heard
Fall from my lips that reassuring word?

ALCESTE

Perhaps to someone else within the hour
You've said as much!

CÉLIMÈNE

Now, certes, that's the flower,
The very pink of lovers' courtesy!
A pretty thing indeed you make of me!
But henceforth drive these notions from your head,
For I do here unsay all I have said:
Give back my heart and I'll return your own,
And let's cry quits!

ALCESTE

Down from your purple throne
Descend, O Love! Lo, here I stand alone,
Betrayed, undone! Ah! could I tear away
My heart from those cold hands, I'd bless this day.
Yes, I avow it — I have done my best
To quench the fatal flame that burns my breast;
But 'tis in vain. To expiate my sins
I'm doomed to love on even where hate begins.

CÉLIMÈNE

You love indeed in unexampled fashion.

ALCESTE

I do — I do — mine is a fatal passion;
It beggars all conception; I defy
The world to show a lover such as I.

CÉLIMÈNE

This love, in truth, is of a novel kind,
That in its object only seeks to find
Some cause for strife, this love that growls and mutters
And burns most hotly when it smokes and sputters.

ALCESTE

Your hand could trim this flame that's so uneven
To burn as brightly as the stars in heaven,
If you but wished. Ah! would you but begin....

[*Enter* BASQUE]

CÉLIMÈNE

What now?

BASQUE

Acaste, the marquis.

CÉLIMÈNE

Show him in.
[*Exit* BASQUE.

ALCESTE

What! can we never have a word in private?
Whene'er I wish to speak must you contrive it
That some unwelcome rival supervening
Shall spy my mien, and try to guess my meaning?

CÉLIMÈNE

What! would you urge me to offend Acaste?

ALCESTE

This state of things, I tell you, cannot last.

CÉLIMÈNE

If I received him coldly, he would be
From this day forth my bitterest enemy.

ALCESTE

What matter if he love you well or ill?

CÉLIMÈNE

I told you why I canvassed his good-will.
He has a certain standing at the court —
I don't know how he came by it — in short,
The great world listens to this malapert,
And though he will not help me, he can hurt.
To gain my ends I swallow down my pride
And keep this loud-tongued braggart on my side.

ALCESTE

Whatever reasons I allege to hate him,
You find more reasons still to tolerate him,
Him and his likes! O double-dealing heart!

[*Enter* BASQUE]

BASQUE

Clitander, madam . . .

ALCESTE

Hah!

CÉLIMÈNE

Why do you start?

ALCESTE

I'm going!

CÉLIMÈNE

Stay!

ALCESTE

Why?

CÉLIMÈNE

Stay!

ALCESTE

To what end?

CÉLIMÈNE

Stay!

ALCESTE

I cannot.

CÉLIMÈNE

But, I beg you. Do!

ALCESTE

Away!
These conversations are a deadly bore,
I come out from them vexed and mad and sore;
I will not stay.

CÉLIMÈNE

Pray do, I beg.

ALCESTE

I won't!

CÉLIMÈNE

Well, have your way, I care not. Don't stay — don't!

[*Enter* ELIANTE, PHILINTE, ACASTE, CLITANDER]

ELIANTE

Clitander and Acaste have come up-stairs.
Were they announced?

CÉLIMENE

Yes, cousin. [*To* BASQUE.] Bring some chairs.
[BASQUE *brings chairs. Exit.*

CÉLIMÈNE

[*To* ALCESTE.] What! not gone yet!

ALCESTE

No, I intend to stay,
Although my visit should outlast the day.
This hour you choose between us.

CÉLIMÈNE

Hush!

ALCESTE

Speak out.

CÉLIMÈNE

You rave!

ALCESTE

You shall no longer flout
My hopes with hollow pretexts. You shall speak.

CÉLIMÈNE

Ah!

ALCESTE

You shall choose between us.

CÉLIMÈNE

What mad freak . . .

ALCESTE

There's no escape. This dallying must end.

CLITANDER

I'm from the Louvre, where poor Cléonte, our friend,
Proved, by a hundred silly things he said,
What none denies: that he's a dunderhead.
Has he no friend who might discreetly hint
'Twere well to hide a head with nothing in't?

CÉLIMÈNE

To wag that empty pate is all his pride,
And to show off the desert realms inside;
He spends whole nights in planning to be clever,
And proves next day a greater fool than ever.

ACASTE

Talking of foolish folk, not long ago,
That drivelling Damon, with a ceaseless flow
Of talk that ended where it had begun,
Kept me a full hour standing in the sun.

CÉLIMÈNE

He is the lord of phrase and periphrase.
He can say nothing — in a thousand ways.
He is Sir Oracle; his misty mind
When seen, is cloud, and, when it's heard, is wind.

ELIANTE

[*To* PHILINTE.] A good beginning; each one has his turn.
If you would know yourself, come here and learn!

CLITANDER

What think you of Timante?

CÉLIMÈNE

A curious creature!
He shows some oddity in every feature.
His head's a ragbag and his brain is dizzy,
And without business he's always busy.
Each word he speaks is subtly underscored,
And sly grimaces flank each droning word;
At every turn he comes in breathless fear
To breathe some secret that you learned last year;
And, when at length he drags himself away,
He hoarsely whispers in your ear: *Good-day!*

ACASTE

And the great man, Géralde?

CÉLIMÈNE

Upon my word,
He's not a man at all, he is a lord!
He mingles only with the world of fashion,
With viscounts, dukes, and princes. His sole passion
Is rank and opulence, and he discourses
Only of mistresses and hounds and horses;
He *thees* and *thous* men of the highest fame,
And none with him have handles to their name.

CLITANDER

I hear his own is coupled with Bélise.

CÉLIMÈNE

It cannot be! What art has she to please?
That witless woman, that remainder biscuit
After love's feast. I'm sure he would not risk it!
She often visits me. O deadly hours,
When I exhaust all my colloquial powers
To talk to her — she cannot talk to me,
But listens on in blank civility,
And in a sort of comatose condition,
Until our monologue dies of inanition.
Not so her visit, that lives on and on,
Long as the Danube, creeping as the Don;
Whole bales of commonplaces are unrolled:
I say it rains, it shines, it's hot, it's cold,
I ask the hour ten times, I yawn, I gape,
And still before me sits that ghastly shape.

ACASTE

You know Adraste, I fancy?

CÉLIMÈNE

All too well!
He has no other pastime than to dwell
On his own worth and to revile the court
Because it will not join him in the sport.
If any post to any man is given,
He cries he has been wronged before high heaven.

CLITANDER

What of young Cleon, at whose crowded board
The meanest guest is either duke or lord?

CÉLIMÈNE

It is the cook they honor, and not Cleon.
He is the god to whom they sing their pæan.

ELIANTE

The table groans with all the rarest dishes.

CÉLIMÈNE

Yes, but among the dainty meats and fishes,
There's always one odd fish that spoils the rest,
And that is Cleon whom I can't digest.

PHILINTE

His uncle Damis, whom all men commend,
Don't you esteem him, madam?

CÉLIMÈNE

As a friend.

PHILINTE

He has a wise and gentlemanly mien.

CÉLIMÈNE

Which, to be laughed at, needs but to be seen.
From head to foot he's all pomposity;
His virtue is all virtuosity;
And since he grew so keenly analytic
Nothing can please this Rhadamanthine critic.
In each new book he spies a thousand blots,
It is a desert with no garden spots;
A critic's skill is only shown in railing;
To admire and to be tickled is a failing.

He scorns the age as much as others love it,
And thinks in hating it he soars above it.
Our very gossip galls his nicer taste,
And he abstains lest he should be disgraced;
With folded arms, throned like a judge, he sits,
And smiles in pity on our grovelling wits.

ACASTE

Of one who speaks not that's a speaking likeness.

CLITANDER

I've met indeed with many I like less.

ALCESTE

Go to't, my weathercocks! On with the joust,
And let some friend drop dead at every thrust!
Yet, by my faith, when last the corse appeared,
You rushed to meet it open-armed, and neared
Your lips to its, and clasped its clammy hands,
Like friends fast joined in everlasting bands.

CLITANDER

Why blame us for this blaze of wit? I fear
Madam's the sole incendiary here.

ALCESTE

But it is your base flattery that kindles
This wicked flame; withdraw that, and it dwindles.
The incense that you burn upon her altar,
The hymns you chant, the ever-open psalter
From which her lauds are sung, your genuflexions,
All bend her soul in these oblique directions.

Thus all who see in vice a venial matter
Become co-partners in the sins they flatter.

PHILINTE

But why so hotly do you now defend
What you are else the first to reprehend?

CÉLIMÈNE

Ah! surely you would not with sour restriction
Deprive him of the joy of contradiction?
Would you oblige him calmly to control
His inborn contrariety of soul?
Say black is black, and straight he will maintain
'Tis white! Agree — and lo! it's black again;
Or try to hedge, and hint it may be brown,
He'll swear it's gray; say gray — he cries you down.
He finds such wondrous charm in opposition
He turns his cannon on his own position,
And fights the very cause he had embraced
If by another's wit he sees it graced.

ALCESTE

The laughers are for you; your sparkling wit
Finds smiling audience here; not few, but fit.

PHILINTE

They're right — and you have more than once confessed
To this strange quirk that leads you to protest
That all men's judgments are asquint and lame
Whether they proffer praise or utter blame.

ALCESTE

Yes, I protest, because all men are mad,
Because they can't distinguish good from bad,
Because I see them, in and out of season,
Praise without sense and censure without reason.

CÉLIMÈNE

But yet . . .

ALCESTE

No! no! Though I should die for it,
I'll speak my mind. I hate your slanderous wit,
And find these gallants' taste not over-nice
To play the panders to your darling vice.

CLITANDER

As for myself, I see no faults, but find
In Célimène the pearl of womankind.

ACASTE

I see, revealed to my embalmèd sense,
In Célimène the flower of innocence.

ALCESTE

True love is stern; it judges and reproves;
It pardons nothing in the one it loves.
True love leans swooning o'er the budding rose,
Yet sees the worm its silken leaves enclose;
True love hangs ravished o'er the glowing pearl,
Yet knows the grain of dross those depths enwhorl.

CÉLIMÈNE

In fine, if we should choose you for our guide,
We'd drive all gentle lovers from our side,
And find love's true knights in the uncontrolled
And stormy swains that only rave and scold.

ELIANTE

True love is gentle, and its procreant eyes
Find only good in what they idolize.
Pale passion, brooding o'er the thing it loves,
Is like the dial's lingering hand that moves
O'er the white disk, and, while its journey lasts,
Perceives no shadow save the one it casts.
Thus the fond lover, dazed by love's assaults,
Worships his lady even in her faults:
The pallid maid has stol'n the jasmine's white;
The swarthy one outshines the starry night;
The bag of bones flits with a lissome grace,
And the fat dame sails onward with majestic pace;
The slattern, who despairs of looking smart,
Has all the charms of nature without art;
The tall is Dian; in the short we scan
All nature's graces in a four-foot span;
The haughty jade's a queen of womankind,
The wily minx is witty, the fool kind,
The chatterbox a paragon of sense,
The taciturn all blushing diffidence.

ALCESTE

Nay, listen, I maintain . . .

CÉLIMÈNE

Come, gentlemen,
The sermon's ended — let us say Amen!
But surely you're not going?

CLITANDER *and* ACASTE

No, indeed!

ALCESTE

You hesitate the parting guest to speed?
Go, if you will, or, if you will, stay on;
I only mean to go when you are gone.

ACASTE

If Célimène but wished it, I could stay
Till night shall veil the lingering eye of day.

CLITANDER

If Célimène but wished it, I could stay
Till midnight and the king call me away.

CÈLIMÉNE

Alceste was jesting.

ALCESTE

No! I want to see
Whether you wish to part with them — or me.

[*Enter* BASQUE]

BASQUE

[*To* ALCESTE.] Sir, there's a man below, big and raw-boned,
On business which he says can't be postponed.
He wears a jacket with a plaited fold,
And has a fringe around it, all of gold.

ALCESTE

Bah! This is tedious as a tale twice-told.

CÉLIMÈNE

Go — show him in.

[*Enter a Guard*]

[*Exit* BASQUE.

ALCESTE

Come, speak, sir. What's your pleasure?

THE GUARD

A word in private, sir, if you're at leisure.

ALCESTE

Come! come! speak out, I have no secrets here.

THE GUARD

Sir, you are hereby summoned to appear
Before the judges.

ALCESTE

I, sir?

THE GUARD

You, sir.

ALCESTE

On what count?

PHILINTE

It's for that stupid quarrel with Oronte.

CÉLIMÈNE

How?

PHILINTE

There's a duel that they would forestall
Between Oronte and him — a silly brawl
About a sonnet he pronounced absurd.

ALCESTE

And so it was — I won't retract a word.

PHILINTE

Be off! You must obey the King's command.

ALCESTE

What! do these judges mean to force my hand?
Must I, forsooth, on pain of death, admire
Those inept verses? Will the laws require
That I abjure the higher laws of taste?
O monstrous rhymes!

PHILINTE

Keep cool, and do not waste
Your breath in railing.

ALCESTE

Hah! Those rhymes are vile.

PHILINTE

Be calm, and try to use a gentler style
Before the court.

ALCESTE

I come — but there's no power
In heaven or earth, I say . . .

PHILINTE

In half an hour
You might undo this coil.

ALCESTE

Unless the king
By sovereign fiat hush me, I will cling
To what I said. That sonnet's void of sense,
And writing it a hangable offense.
[*To* CLITANDER *and* ACASTE, *who laugh*:]
Zounds! gentlemen, I did not know my wit
Had so much salt for you!

CÉLIMÈNE

Come, sprinkle it
With more discretion. It is time to go.

ALCESTE

'Tis time to go — aye, madam, even so —
But there are weightier issues that I burn
To hear you fix. I go — but I return!
[*Exit* ALCESTE *with Guard.*

ACT III

CLITANDER AND ACASTE

CLITANDER

Hail, good my lord! You seem in happy mood,
Gay as a lark! But do no cares intrude?
And do no doubts, no spectral visions rise,
No fear of rivals in your paradise?

ACASTE

[*Surveying* CLITANDER *from head to foot*]
I think I see a serpent — up a tree —
A garter'd snake! But what is that to me?
I fear no rivals; I am rich, I'm young,
I'm from the most exalted lineage sprung,
And with no other sanction than my race
I can aspire to the supremest place.
I'm not without some skill in larding men
With this good blade — but only now and then.
You know my last affair? You look perplexed;
Don't fret — I will invite you to the next.
[CLITANDER *toys with his sword.*
But I'm for peace, not war. Upon my word,
The tongue with me is mightier than the sword.
Wit outshines valor even, wit and good taste,
(And I claim both); I judge all things post-haste,
And without study still I hit the mark.
At the new plays 'tis I who light the spark

That sets off the applause; when I cry *Ah*
A hundred clap their hands, a hundred cry *Huzza!*
I'm graceful, too, I'm tall and bonny-faced,
With alabaster teeth and slender waist.
As for my tailor (without vanity)
He makes a daily masterpiece of me.
Loved by the sex, and honored by the king,
I am indeed not Fortune's underling.
Thus, good my lord, it cannot be denied
I have some reason to be satisfied.

CLITANDER

But since elsewhere you find such easy spoils,
Why linger here with unrequited toils?

ACASTE

Go to! I'm not a man to toil in vain
And sue the fair with unrepaying pain;
It is for homelier heads and wits than mine
To bow unheeded before beauty's shrine,
To turn to marble with congealing fears,
Or melt away like Niobe in tears,
To languish all day and all night complain,
And feed ten years on woman's dear disdain,
Waiting on slow time in the hope to herit
What love denies to their inglorious merit.
But, good my lord, a gallant of my fashion
Is paid in full for what he spends of passion;
I know my worth and keep it well in mind;
Who wins my homage must repay in kind;
And when I love, — this wager you may lay —
My lady comes to meet my love half-way.

CLITANDER

Think you, my lord, you are in favor here?

ACASTE

I know, my lord, that all the coast is clear.

CLITANDER

Believe me, you were never more mistaken,
The siege is done, the fort's already taken:
You're fooled, you're blind.

ACASTE

'Tis true, I'm fooled, I'm blind!

CLITANDER

Why do you fancy Célimène so kind?

ACASTE

I'm fooled!

CLITANDER

Her radiance on a rival beams.

ACASTE

I'm blind!

CLITANDER

You only intercept the gleams.

ACASTE

I'm hoodwinked!

CLITANDER

Have you won some token,
Some lover's knot, some kiss, some word soft-spoken?
Confess you have not.

ACASTE

Nay — I am abused!

CLITANDER

But answer me!

ACASTE

Alas! I am ill-used!

CLITANDER

A truce to banter! Tell me, dear sir, frankly,
What feeds this full-blown hope that shoots so rankly?

ACASTE

You are the habitant of paradise;
I but o'erpeep the wall with envious eyes;
You cull the rose, I bleed upon the thorn,
And mean to hang myself — to-morrow morn.

CLITANDER

Come, let's decide by some convincing proof
Which one she loves, from which she stands aloof;
And, if you hold the tokens of her favor,
'Tis you shall crop the flower and breathe its savor,
But, if I flaunt her colors, you shall yield
And I remain sole victor in the field.

ACASTE

Agreed! No compact, sir, could please me better,
And I'll observe it — to the very letter!
But hush!

[*Enter* CÉLIMÈNE]

CÉLIMÈNE

Still here!

ACASTE *and* CLITANDER

Love chains us to the spot!

CÉLIMÈNE

I heard a carriage coming, did I not?
I wonder who it is.

[*Enter* BASQUE]

BASQUE

Madam, Arsinoë.

CÉLIMÈNE

What can that horrid woman want of me?

BASQUE

Eliante is talking with her below-stairs.

[*Exit* BASQUE.

CÉLIMÈNE

Why drop down from the clouds thus unawares?

ACASTE

This crooked twig is tardily contracting
A sudden bent toward straitness; she's reacting . . .

CÉLIMÈNE

She's merely acting, not reacting, sir;
I could point out some ugly twists in her
That you'd scarce credit. All her snares are set
To catch some tardy lover in her net.
She lies in ambush and with baleful eyes
Transfixing all who carry off a prize,
She curses her inexorable luck —
Poor faded wall-flower none will stoop to pluck!
She waits, and waits, and coyly plays the prude
To mask her life of loveless solitude.
She calls each smile a snare, each grace a blot,
In all who have the charms that she has not.
Thin dreams of love still wanton with her rest,
And rumor says she's angling for Alceste;
And, what is more, that, baffled in her wishes,
She cries 'tis I, and not herself, that fishes.
In every place where both of us are known
She hints dark things of me in whispered tone;
In short, the jade is wholly void of sense
And most consummate in her impudence.

[*Enter* ARSINOE]

Ah! what blest chance has brought you here to-day?
I have so missed you while you were away!

ARSINOE

There are some weighty things I have to tell.

CÉLIMÈNE

Ravished to see you — and to see you well!

[*Exeunt* ACASTE *and* CLITANDER.

ARSINOE

I'm glad we have no auditors at hand.

CÉLIMÈNE

Come — let's sit down!

ARSINOE

No — I prefer to stand.
True friendship, madam, chiefly shines in this,
To warn our friends whene'er they go amiss.
Whatever precious gems she wear upon her,
A woman's brightest jewel is her honor;
Since honor can be sold but never bought.
Without that grace her beauty counts for naught.
Therefore I've come to make communication
Of something that concerns your reputation.
Being lately with a group of pious friends,
Gathered for virtuous and holy ends,
We chanced to talk of you, and, truth to tell,
Your conduct did not please them very well.
These many gallants trailing in your wake,
Your levity, the liberties you take,
Your routs, your balls, — all these were little relished,
And met more censure than I could have wished.
Of course the more I heard them discommend you,
The more I strained and shifted to defend you,
I guaranteed your purity of heart,
And tried to prove them wrong — at least in part.
I said that rumors often are inventions,
And sought excuses in your good intentions;
But there are things so plausible, you know,

That, though not true, all people think them so,
And there are actions of such doubtful hue,
That I could not defend them — nor could you.
Thus I was forced against my will to grant
That your behavior has a dubious slant,
And that, when measured with impartial eyes,
It has a tendency to scandalize.
I had to grant, too, that you were to blame
For letting gossip play around your name.
I know, of course, you have not set at naught
The laws of virtue — Heaven forbid the thought!
But even the purest sins against her honor
Who lets one word of scandal breathe upon her.
Madam, I know that you're the soul of reason,
And will not find my warnings out of season;
I know you'll weigh the counsels I deliver,
And trust you'll take the hint and thank the giver.

CÉLIMÈNE

Madam, I thank you for this show of zeal,
And will not hide the gratitude I feel.
With no less warmth than you display for mine
I burn to see your honor purely shine,
And mean to pay you back without delay
By telling you in turn what people say.
Being lately with some very worthy friends —
Though met for festive joy and social ends —
We chanced to talk of you, and, to tell all,
Your conduct did not please these folks at all.
Your prudish mien, your sanctimonious face,
Your ceaseless talk of holiness and grace,

Your constant seeing of some vile intent,
Some soul of evil in things innocent,
Your poisoned hints, with honied words embellished,
All these, my dear, were very little relished.
Your swollen self-conceit, the pitying tone
With which you gauge all merits but your own,
Your caviling, your scoffing, your damnation
Of even the most harmless recreation,
These silly fashions into which you fall
Were loudly disapproved by one and all.
'Why this coy speech,' — they asked — 'these down-
cast eyes,
And these chaste airs which all her life belies?
She ne'er forgets when it is time to pray,
But beats her maid, whom she forgets to pay.
At church she kneels, the image of a saint,
All piety, all powder, and all paint.
A naked Venus makes her blush and start;
Yet who would swear she never played the part?
In private frail, pure in the public eye,
Her whole career is one protracted lie.'
Of course, in hearing them thus reprehend you,
I also nobly labored to defend you,
But labored vainly — I alone defended
And all the other twenty reprehended!
'She that is pure,' they said, 'doth still incline,
Shining in grace, to let her sister shine;
She does not seek her virtues to besmirch,
But leaves her sins to Heaven and to the Church!
To sum up, they agreed, in spite of me,
That there are things we scent yet cannot see,

And that it's best for a sagacious nose
To shun the strange and smell the home-grown rose,
Lest proving but a barren counterfeit,
Known by some other name, it smell less sweet.
Madam, I know that you, too, worship reason
And find its wisdom never out of season;
I know you'll weigh the counsels I deliver
And hope you'll take the hint, and thank the giver.

ARSINOE

Madam, though good advice is oft rejected,
Yet your retort is scarce what I expected,
And has in it a something splenetic
That shows your heart is wounded to the quick.

CÉLIMÈNE

Far from it; — were we wise, we'd put in use
This courteous interchanging of abuse.
Such mutual hints, well-meant and kindly given,
Would cure us of the blind self-love we live in.
And so, good madam, if you have the heart,
Let's exercise this edifying art
By still repeating all the ill we hear,
You of myself, and I of you, my dear.

ARSINOE

Madam, I'm sure you have no enemies;
'Tis I repel the people whom you please.

CÉLIMÈNE

Madam, all things may merit praise or blame,
Since changeful Time leaves nothing long the same.

Things shine to-day that yesterday did not,
And what's pure now to-morrow wears a spot.
There is a time for love, and smiles, and sport,
And there's a time for putting into port;
There comes an hour for turning prude at last,
When youth and all its gaieties are past.
This solemn air sits well on faded cheeks,
And in spent eyes it eloquently speaks;
I, too, may come to this pass, I allow,
When age and wrinkles teach me when and how;
But now — the difference of our age how vast!
I have a future — and you have a past!

ARSINOE

You vaunt your youth with jubilating tongue,
As if none but yourself was ever young,
And stress and magnify with joy malign
The little span between your age and mine;
What is the cause of this injurious tone?
Do you suspect a rival near the throne?

CÉLIMÈNE

What is the cause, if I in turn may ask,
That you are always taking me to task?
Why do you rail at me through court and town,
And as a faithless minion cry me down?
Why blame me for your dateless maidenhood
And for the rage of winters unwithstood?
You cannot say it is from you I take
The many gallants trailing in my wake,
Nor can I help it if myself they woo
With vows they never dreamed of paying you.

The field is free, you need but ply your charms
To draw this horde of lovers to your arms.

ARSINOE

Nay, do not think I am so much concerned
If you possess the lovers I have spurned.
Do you suppose I do not know their price,
Too high for virtue — not too high for vice?
Do you suppose this wicked world believes
That she gives nothing who so much receives,
And that these gallants glow with virtuous fires
And round chaste altars burn with pure desires?
The world is not your dupe, and I could name
Full many a virtuous and comely dame
That walks without a lover at her side
Because her honor is her only pride;
And thence derives an obvious inference:
Man's love is commonly the tool of sense,
And, when fond lovers at the altar bend,
To rob its treasure is their secret end.
You need not therefore hold your head so high
Because you have what everyone could buy;
Nor need you speak in such disdainful tone
Of those whose charms are charier than your own;
If they but wished, they could dispute the prize
Which they abandon to your conquering eyes,
And, if they deigned to copy you, could prove
That all have lovers who will pay for love.

CÉLIMÈNE

Do, madam, do; show how the trick is done,
And teach it to the world by having one.

ARSINOE

Madam, it's time this *tête-à-tête* should cease;
It has already had too large a lease,
And, if prolonged, it might fatigue your wit.
So Basque shall call my coach, if you permit.

CÉLIMÈNE

By all means; but, while waiting, I entreat
That you will take this comfortable seat,
Don't stand on ceremony! But — behold!
Here is my friend Alceste, a heart of gold,
And wit as golden. Pray, let it atone
For all that you have suffered from my own.
Alceste, I have a little note to write,
Which I must send away by post to-night.
So, take my place and play the host for me,
And compensate my scanted courtesy.

[*Exit.*

ARSINOE

Sir, rest assured it needed no behest,
When you play host, for me to be the guest.
Companioned thus, I thank with all my heart
A hostess who disdains to play her part.
For, truly, merit so sublime as yours
Wins plaudits from all men, and even ensures
Homage more ardent still from womankind,
If, like myself, they have an open mind.
I cannot understand the king's neglect,
Who holds all virtue in supreme respect;
It's most unjust, and I am deeply grieved
To see your merit languish unperceived.

ALCESTE

Mine, madam? But what claims have I to urge?
What virtues that o'er all the rest emerge?
What acts of mine, what exploits stand recorded,
That I should rail at going unrewarded?

ARSINOE

All those who shine in the court's grateful eye,
Can they all claim the worth that you deny?
Merit must wait on opportunity,
And if such things depended upon me . . .

ALCESTE

Come, come, let's talk of more authentic things.
My merits make no claim on courts and kings.
The king indeed would have enough to do
If he must use our worth and find it too.

ARSINOE

A thing that shines so bright needs little finding;
We read the volume's worth in its rich binding.
And, do you know, I hear on every hand
That you have scarce your equal in the land.

ALCESTE

All men to-day are lauded to the skies,
And every comer carries off a prize;
Each piddling merit equals every other,
And every hero has a hero-brother;
Praise upon praise is lavished without stint,
And even my valet reads his name in print.

ARSINOE

Yet surely you might bid for wider fame
And add new honor to your honored name.
If some court-function square with your desires,
I have some potent friends can pull the wires;
They'll pave the way for you at my behest;
You need but nod, and they will do the rest.

ALCESTE

What function, madam, could I fill at court?
To be the butt of rivals, and the sport
Of shifting winds of favor, to find bliss
In a king's greeting or a courtier's kiss?
I have not learned to bend a pliant knee;
I do not fawn on rank and pedigree;
I have no skill to feign and play a part;
To be sincere and frank is all my art.
Tongues that are blunt or that are too distraught
To give a crooked flexure to the thought,
Hearts that are pure and hands that fear a stain
May go to court indeed, but go in vain.
I'm well aware that it alone can give
The wealth and honor on which worldlings live,
But he who will not stoop to beg this trash,
He who disdains the credit and the cash,
He plays no part in the great pantomime,
He need not praise the lords who rave in rhyme,
He need not pocket insults and rebuffs,
Or live 'mong periwigs and powder-puffs,
Or march a captive in his lady's train,
Or mix with gallants born without a brain.

ARSINOE

Well, there's another topic I would broach,
Since this one seems too thorny to approach;
Yet I scarce dare to, lest my heart appear
Touched by your woe and welfare all too near.
But, truly, I've observed with deep regret
How much of love you give, how little get;
I feel that you deserve a better fate
And might find elsewhere a more worthy mate.

ALCESTE

Indeed, you show me a most tender zeal,
Such as a lover must profoundly feel.

ARSINOE

Friendship oft makes the unwilling eye more keen,
And faults none guessed by it alone are seen.
Your vows are wasted on a faithless heart
That has ensnared you with disloyal art.

ALCESTE

It may be so — love still is doomed to be
The fool of hope; it looks yet cannot see.
But oh, what cruelty thus to unchain
Fantasmal torments in a lover's brain!

ARSINOE

Nay — have your way then and be still deceived!
Words are but words, if they be not believed.

ALCESTE

Speak, speak! There is no agony like doubt,
No torture like a thing past finding out.

I would know all, and yet — I'll credit naught,
Till twenty proofs confirm this damnèd thought.

ARSINOE

Enough, 'tis well; since you demand more light,
I'll furnish proofs set down in black and white.
Lend me your arm and your good company
For just a short half-hour, and you shall see
(I can't refuse when it is you who ask it)
A little letter in a little casket,
Penned by a fair but very fickle hand
That writes its vows of love in shifting sand!
Ah! if you wished, I know where you could find
A heart more loyal and a love more kind.

ACT IV

ELIANTE AND PHILINTE

PHILINTE

I never yet essayed a task more cruel
Than to distrain this madman from this duel.
I'm sure these solemn judges never had
A stranger case to judge, or man more mad!
We reasoned, argued, threatened, all in vain,
We still came back to the same point again.
'No, no,' he cried, 'there's nothing to be done;
I will agree to all things save this one.
Where lies the offense? Why does Oronte complain?
If I extolled his rhymes, what would he gain?
Or, if I blame them, how is he the worse?
There's little honor comes from writing verse,
And I'll maintain, though in the court's despite,
A man's a man, even though he cannot write.
I will agree Oronte has every merit,
Has every grace of body and of spirit,
Has blood, and gallantry, and understanding,
But he's a wretched poet, notwithstanding.
I'll praise (if you insist) his free financing,
His horsemanship, his fencing, and his dancing;
But rhyming, good sirs, that's another matter;
There I speak truth; there I refuse to flatter;
And I'll be hanged if I will doff my bonnet
To the concocter of that shambling sonnet.
A man who rhymes so ill should never do it,
Though thumbscrews and the devil drive him to it.'

The judges labored hard, and I still harder,
To make less bellicose this foaming ardor,
And finally our efforts end in this:
He gives the rhymester a reluctant kiss,
And fetches forth from an obstructed throat
The muttered words: 'Sir, with regret I note
My taste is much too classic for your verse,
And, for your sake, I wish that it were worse.'
And therewithal we wind up the whole matter,
The judges vacate, and the audience scatter.

ELIANTE

Although his actions are a little mad,
They have their fineness, too; and, I must add,
This bold sincerity, this virtuous pride,
Has a heroic and a noble side;
It sits upon him as upon a throne,
And I could wish all hearts were like his own.

PHILINTE

Alas! the more I watch our moody friend,
The more I fear this dismal drama's end.
This humorous creature, this fantastic heart,
Was never meant to play a lover's part;
And of all ladies he has ever seen
The last he should have loved is Célimène.

ELIANTE

This only proves that love is not the child
Of blended humors and of souls beguiled
By mutual music till they interfuse, —
Nay, love is chance, and lovers do not choose.

PHILINTE

But do you think Alceste is truly loved?

ELIANTE

That is a point not easy to be proved.
I cannot read the heart of her he loves;
Herself perchance scarce knows what motive moves
Those alternating tides that rise and fall
And now o'erflow and now flow not at all.

PHILINTE

Alas! too oft things are not what they seem,
And love's high hopes turn to a troubled dream.
Were I Alceste, and Alceste I, I'd seek
Love's answering passion in a paler cheek
And read its wistful yearning in an eye
Made pensive by expectant constancy.
Why then quest for a wilder flower less near,
If I could pluck the rose that tarries here?

ELIANTE

I cannot speak the language of the rose,
And needs must answer you in plainest prose.
I feel a sister's fondness for Alceste,
And long to see his wayward passion blest,
To see him and the object of his vows
A ravished husband and a blissful spouse.
But should some chance disastrously disperse
These golden hopes, and if, in this reverse,
He looked for consolation otherwhere,
It is not I could let him long despair;

And I would prize with a more constant love
The heart another proved unworthy of.

PHILINTE

I see with grief, yet with no jealous smart,
Another's image graven on your heart.
Alceste himself can tell you how I've pled
To see his love — not mine — retributed.
Yet should he some day wed his Célimène,
Though you might still a sister's love retain,
Might not a livelier passion touch your heart,
One that should warm the whole, and not a part?
This is the dream that I refuse to banish,
And should all bars and scruples haply vanish,
This rounded sphere could hold no bliss more sweet
Than mine to lay my homage at your feet.

ELIANTE

Your speech grows rosy — let's return to prose!

PHILINTE

These are no flowers of speech — each reddening rose
Is rooted in my heart, and my best blood
Has dyed each blossom in its crimson flood.

[*Enter* ALCESTE]

ALCESTE

[*To* ELIANTE.] Avenge, avenge me for a woe past cure,
For an affront no mortal could endure!

ELIANTE

Why! what is this? What passion moves you so?

ALCESTE

A thing that it is very death to know!
Not the collapse of universal nature
Could stir me more! Not Heaven's own judicature
Could fathom crimes like this! Alas! all's lost!

ELIANTE

Alack, poor soul! by what strange tempests tost!

ALCESTE

O cozening nature! why imprint a grace
So fatal-false on such a heavenly face!

ELIANTE

But speak, Alceste, explain . . .

ALCESTE

A jilt! a jade!
I shall go mad! I'm fooled, deceived, betrayed!
By Célimène! It staggers all belief,
All hope of restoration or relief!

ELIANTE

But have you some convincing proof of this?

PHILINTE

Suspicion often leads the mind amiss,
And jealous fancies oft on shadows feed.

ALCESTE

Sir — your advice I neither ask nor heed.

[*To* ELIANTE.] What proof more damning can my soul demand
Than this brief scrawl? How well I know this hand!
This letter to Oronte (O cursèd name!)
Makes clear as day my ruin and her shame.
Oronte! whose blandishments I thought she fled,
The only rival whom I did not dread!

PHILINTE

A letter sometimes runs to strange extremes
And is not half so guilty as it seems.

ALCESTE

Sir, I repeat, since I must say it twice,
That I have not requested your advice.

ELIANTE

Kind hearts, being wronged, learn to forget their wrongs.

ALCESTE

Oh, teach me then! to you that work belongs.
Your gentle hand alone can bring relief
And healing balm to still this gnawing grief.
Avenge — avenge me on this recreant heart,
Whose vows forsworn and double-dealing art
Make hideous mock of constancy like mine.

ELIANTE

What? I revenge you? How?

ALCESTE

Make but a sign,
And all my heart is yours. Old love is killed
When by a newer love its place is filled.

I'll punish Célimène by paying you
The vows she scorns, the observances, the true
And ardent love, the thousand courtesies,
The pledges, the regards, the passioned pleas
That are the soul of love.

ELIANTE

Nay, what you speak,
Alceste, though I myself might fondly seek
To hear your words reworded, is but founded
On fragile fancies all too vaguely grounded;
And this hot lust for vengeance that you cherish
So lightly born may just as lightly perish.
When we are wronged by one we deeply love
We make a thousand plans, but not one move!
In vain we see and sanction every reason
That bids us flee, the broken vows, the treason,
We swear we'll go, we'll fly — and still we stay
Till reason with our reasons flies away.
No woes seem hard as love's woes to endure,
Yet one soft word suffices for their cure.

ALCESTE

No — no — for an offense so black as this
There is no cure, no reconciling kiss.
Not heaven itself shall change the oath I've sworn,
I'd scorn myself for pardoning her I scorn.
Look where she comes! O hypocritic face!
That cloaks such falsehood with celestial grace!
I will o'erwhelm her with her infamy
And all the monstrous wrong she's wrought on me,

And then bring back a heart wrung from her toils
And lay it at your feet to be your spoils.

[*Enter* CÉLIMÈNE *and exeunt* PHILINTE *and* ELIANTE.]

ALCESTE

O teach me patience, Heaven! my senses reel!

CÉLIMÈNE [*aside*]

O ho! [*To* ALCESTE.] How now? What's this? What is't you feel?
What is the meaning of these stifled cries,
These tragic glances and these deep-fetched sighs?

ALCESTE

They mean that love like yours is bought and sold,
Is liberal as the air, is icy cold
As wintry winds, and changeful as the sea —
A vast, unfathomed, dark iniquity.

CÉLIMÈNE

Bravo! what heights of eloquence you reach!
Though I'm its subject, I applaud the speech.

ALCESTE

Think not to stop me with your galling wit!
Blush rather — you have ample cause for it.
I bear the tokens of your treason here!
This sets its seal on my presageful fear —
This stamps you false — and in this little space
Is writ your shame, my ruin, our disgrace!
Those hateful fears that robbed me of my rest
Imaged a woe that I too rightly guessed,

And through your fine-spun duperies, to me
My bodeful star revealed what was to be.
O monstrous deed! all Nature veils her face
And the heavens darken o'er your soul's disgrace.
'Tis past all remedy! I know — I know —
Love does not at our bidding ebb and flow
Like the moon-lifted tides — I know the heart
Is free as air to seek its counterpart;
I should not vex your ear with my complaining,
Had those false lips abjured their trick of feigning;
Had you with honest openness replied,
I should have loved you still, although denied.
But to invite my vows, to fan my flame,
And treat my wooing as a merry game,
An interlude to tease an idle ear,
A mummer's masque, a show to mock and jeer,
That is a dereliction cries to heaven,
And never was and ne'er can be forgiven.
After such wrong, there is no respite more.
My spirit wanders on the utmost shore
Of patience, and I dream fantastic things,
Insane revenges, mad imaginings!
In very truth, what can I say — what do?
Pierced with this poisoned dagger — and by you!

CÉLIMÈNE

What means this rhapsody on tides and treason?
Good sir — I half suspect you've lost your reason.

ALCESTE

I lost — I lost it when my constant eye
Sought in your own an answering constancy,

When I leaned o'er the flower of your rich beauty
And sucked its honied poison, when I dreamed
You understood my love, my vows, my duty,
And that you might be even what you seemed!

CÉLIMÈNE

And of what lawless deeds are you complaining?

ALCESTE

O heart forsworn! O tongue adept in feigning!
How are you trapped at last in your own snares!
See what accusing face this writing wears!
Upon this note all my revolt is grounded,
And by these lines your falsehood stands confounded.

CÉLIMÈNE

So — that's the bird that chirrups in the bush!

ALCESTE

Look, brazen minx, look on this note, and blush!

CÉLIMÈNE

I do not blush — and yet I see the note.

ALCESTE

Will you perchance forswear your hand that wrote,
Because this cunning missive bears no name?

CÉLIMÈNE

Nay — why should I my proper hand disclaim?

ALCESTE

And can you thus without a qualm behold
These lines that all your perfidy unfold?
For me each burning letter leaps and dances —
Yet you stand by with cold, unheedful glances!

CÉLIMÈNE

Let me sit out the dance — here, 'gainst the wall.

ALCESTE

Hah! you deride me? You deny this scrawl?
Oronte! Oronte! It is to him you wrote
The honied phrases of this traitorous note.

CÉLIMÈNE

Oronte! who says this honey flowed for him?

ALCESTE

Some honest friends, who showed how your lewd whim
Had leaped from one to t'other! Yet, let's grant
Some other gallant is your pursuivant
And wears your favors, — how am I the less
Abused and flouted by your faithlessness?

CÉLIMÈNE

If these words, now, were written to a woman,
Might I not seem less guilty, less inhuman?

ALCESTE

O shifty ruse! O pregnant emphasis!
Fie! what a wretched comedy is this!

Do you pretend with shams so pitiful
To turn me to a puppet, to a gull? —
Do women write such burning words as these,
And interchange such amorous ecstasies?
Speak! by what juggling will you nullify
The black impeachment of this bare-faced lie?
Come, cure your poison with some antidote,
And conjure out a woman from this note.

CÉLIMÈNE

I much regret, sir, I must say you nay.
I have mislaid my conjuror's wand to-day,
Unless perchance it is the same I see
Now brandished like a ferule over me.

ALCESTE

Come, don't be angry! Make this matter clear.
Show how your conduct and your words cohere.

CÉLIMÈNE

No — I protest! Nor do I care a whit
If you condemn me or if you acquit.

ALCESTE

Come, Célimène, persuade me, if you can,
That this was for a woman, not a man.
On this one point let me be satisfied,
And I'll believe all else.

CÉLIMÈNE

Believed, belied,
It is all one to me — I have no pride!

Believe, sir, what you will. Believe Oronte
To be my paragon, believe I vaunt
Oronte's address, his grace, his wit, his worth,
And that I am Oronte's from this time forth.
Farewell — forget my odious sins and vices,
And leave me henceforth to my own devices.

ALCESTE [*aside*]

Did ever true love perish in this wise,
Or read its doom in such dissembling eyes?
I come here to complain of Célimène,
Armed with just wrath and resolute disdain
And all the fury of a passion spurned,
And lo! on me I see the tables turned!
'Tis I am wronged, and it is she who chides,
'Tis I entreat and it is she derides!
And yet my heart — my feeble heart — relents!
Its cloudy counterpoise of arguments
Melts mist-like into naught — my thought-sick care
Forgets its theme, and love gloats on despair.
In vain I rail at those disloyal eyes,
I see them always with a new surprise;
In vain I shun the magic of that voice,
It need but speak, I yield — I have no choice.
Oh, I could gaze forever on that face
And love my hate, and dote on my disgrace.
[*To* CÉLIMÈNE.] Ah! how you turn to profit, sorceress,
The very impotence of love's excess,
And coldly play with the consuming fire
Of passion which those fatal eyes inspire!
At least let me believe you did not sin,

Seem true as you are fair, without, within;
Read me this riddle to my heart's content,
And show this letter can be innocent.
Ah! were you half so glad to undeceive
As I, fond fool! am eager to believe.

CÉLIMÈNE

Think you these sullen fits, this jealous woe,
Deserve affection such as I bestow?
Tell me, what reason have I for constraining
My soul to falsehood and perjurious feigning?
Why, if my heart were toward another turned,
Need I conceal the flame with which it burned?
Does not the promise of my hand suffice?
Must I depopulate my paradise?
And must an angel with a flaming sword
Drive all intruders out — except my lord?
You have my word, while waiting for my hand,
And favored thus, what more can you demand?
So sweet a pledge should kill all jealous fear
And chime like music in a lover's ear.
These chaste confessions are not lightly made,
But, like shy violets, blossom best in shade.
A woman's first thought is of pride and honor,
Whene'er love's balmy zephyrs breathe upon her.
And so, when I avow my love for you,
How dare you think me aught but pure and true?
How dare you deem a woman's faith so brittle,
And when I say so much, believe so little?
Nay, tell me, is it seemly, is it well,
To doubt a thing I find so hard to tell?

Ah, me! your jealous qualms, your unbelief
Should rouse resentment, sir, instead of grief,
If I were not so placable, so human,
So foolish-fond, in short, so mere a woman.
Would I were like you — then, I, too, might dream
Elsewhere to seek new love, and a more sure esteem.

ALCESTE

Do you cajole me still? Ah! could I know!
I had not thought love could unman me so,
Or will and wisdom suffer such eclipse!
One glance, one sigh, one accent from those lips,
And I'm undone; I melt like wax in fire;
I thrill with wild and infinite desire;
I can resist no more — it is my fate —
My bliss or bane and all my future state
Lie hazardous in you!

CÉLIMÈNE

Now heaven beshrew!
Would you could learn to love as others do!

ALCESTE

No, no, there never was a love like mine.
It has strange depths that you can scarce divine,
Mad moods when passion's introverted zeal
Makes me desire your woe and not your weal:
I wish you lived unseen, unloved, unprized,
Your virtues scorned, your charms unrecognized,
That stepdame Fortune, jealous of your worth,
Had given you neither rank, nor wealth, nor birth,

So that my heart o'erwhelmingly might prove
The boundless magnanimity of love,
So that my soul alone might comprehend you,
My arm alone sustain you and defend you,
So I might ever give, you ever take,
And know no bliss except the bliss I make.

CÉLIMÈNE

Was ever lover half so mad as you!
Kind Heaven forbid such auguries come true!
But here's your valet with his big, round face
Shrouded in gloom.

[*Enter* DUBOIS]

ALCESTE

What means this strange grimace?
Come, sirrah, speak!

DUBOIS

Of mystery here's your fill!

ALCESTE

What news?

DUBOIS

Sir, our affairs stand ill.

ALCESTE

Go on.

DUBOIS

Shall I speak out?

ALCESTE

Yes — and at once.

DUBOIS

Master, are we alone?

ALCESTE

O triple dunce!

Wilt speak or no?

DUBOIS

Our safety lies in flight.

ALCESTE

What, fool?

DUBOIS

We must pack off, like thieves at night.

ALCESTE

But why?

DUBOIS

Sir, we must quit this parlous spot.

ALCESTE

The cause?

DUBOIS

You'll fly, sir, if you know what's what.

ALCESTE

Tell me the reason for this raving, scamp.

DUBOIS

With bag and baggage, sir, we must decamp.

ALCESTE

You numskull, I will break your wooden pate,
If you continue thus to divagate.

DUBOIS

Sir, in one word then, since you'd just as lief,
I'll take on me to be both short and brief;
A man then, briefly, a man with a brief,
A little short man, a fat man, all black,
Both as to clothes and as to looks, alack!
Came right into our kitchen with a writ;
And, though I couldn't read a word of it,
That it concerns your suit I have no doubt,
Though not the devil himself could make it out.

ALCESTE

But what is the connection, ignoramus,
Between my fleeing and the court's mandamus?

DUBOIS

Why, don't you see? within an hour or two,
A gentleman who sometimes visits you,
Came seeking us, and when he found you gone,
Surcharged me in a sort of whispered tone,
Knowing my zeal, and valuing the same,
To warn you — Lord! I can't recall his name.

ALCESTE

Confound his name, and tell me what he said.

DUBOIS

He said — this friend, sir, — that unless you fled,

You'd find a sudden danger has arisen
Of being *volens nolens* clapped in prison.

ALCESTE

He said no more? Nothing to make me see
The meaning of this puzzling mystery?

DUBOIS

Nothing at all. He asked for pen and ink
And jotted down some lines, in which I think
You'll find perhaps this riddle's lock and key.

ALCESTE

Give me this paper, quick!

CÉLIMÈNE

What can this be?

ALCESTE

I know not, though I hope in time to learn.
Come, fellow, quick!

DUBOIS

Good sir, I turn and turn
My pockets inside out and outside in,
And think so hard it makes my cranium spin;
It seems as if that paper were a fable.
Hah! I recall — I left it on your table.

ALCESTE

Go, find it, clotpoll, or ——

[*Exit* DUBOIS.

CÉLIMÈNE

Be calm, Alceste;
Let's hope all this proves but a silly jest.

ALCESTE

It seems that fate, whate'er I say or do,
Debars us from a peaceful interview;
Yet let me hope, before this day is past,
To find you here, alone with me, at last.

ACT V

ALCESTE AND PHILINTE

ALCESTE

I am resolved, beyond all thought of change.

PHILINTE

But why indulge a fantasy so strange?

ALCESTE

No, no! Not all the grounds you can allege,
Nor all your sophistries can blunt the edge
Of my fixed purpose. O Satanic age,
In which such malice and corruption rage!
O world, all wickedness, and fraud, and force!
I will renounce all human intercourse.
I've lost my suit! Yet all things favored me,
Equity, honor, virtue, decency.
All men proclaimed the rightness of my cause,
And I relied on justice and the laws;
Yet I relied upon them to my cost:
In spite of everything my suit is lost.
A knave contemned alike by foes and friends,
Achieves, despite me, his nefarious ends.
His crime is sanctioned by the court's decree,
And the Heavens wink at this iniquity!
Nor is this all, Philinte! This wretch accursed
Now adds a second outrage to the first:
There is a book, of which you've surely heard,

A filthy book, vile, impudent, absurd,
A book in short that's worthy of the halter,
Penned by some enemy of throne and altar;
And now this rogue pretends 'twas I who wrote it;
And here's Oronte who dares in turn to quote it,
And tries to prove, by matter and by style,
That I, and I alone, could vent such bile!
Oronte, that model of our courtly youth,
Whom I have piqued by telling him the truth;
This coxcomb who would force me, willy-nilly,
To laud his limping verse, however silly;
This fop, who loathes the truth, and therefore me,
Because I answered him so honestly,
Now hates me with inexorable hate,
And paints me as a foe to church and state;
He seeks to fix on me imagined crimes,
And all because I did not like his rhymes!
O monstrous world! all men are of this sort;
They mock at virtue and make truth their sport,
They set dishonor on a golden throne,
And are sincere in villainy alone.
It is too much — I've suffered here too long;
I sicken at this scene of lust and wrong;
Since man turns wolf, the wolf shall be my brother,
And in his wild world I'll forget the other.

PHILINTE

Schemes such as this demand much care and thought.
Let's wait — your picture's a bit over-wrought.
This aftermath of scandal that has risen
Has done small harm: you are not yet in prison.

Calumnious tales die of their own accord,
And liars oft are pierced with their own sword.

ALCESTE

My adversary fears no counterblasts.
For him the uninterrupted sunshine lasts.
To-day we see him half-way up the hill;
To-morrow we shall see him higher still.

PHILINTE

His currish malice wins such meager credit
'Twill turn and rend the wicked hand that fed it.
This judgment, too, has no finality:
A higher court may change the court's decree.

ALCESTE

No, I will cling to it at any cost.
'Tis twenty thousand francs that I have lost,
Yet do I cheaply gain by these reverses
The right of venting twenty thousand curses
On this distempered world. This day, this date
Shall stand as monuments to consecrate
To unborn ages my immortal hate!

PHILINTE

But yet ——

ALCESTE

But me no buts! I will not change my mind,
Your words play round me like the whistling wind.
What! will you dare before my very face
Excuse the antics of the human race?

PHILINTE

No, I will grant half mankind are in league
To rule the rest by force and by intrigue;
I'll grant that all are vile, the world a den,
That men are wolves — but not that wolves are men
Yet why should all this furnish argument
To turn nomadic and set up a tent?
These human frailties that you wish to flee
Are stimulants for our philosophy;
In them lie virtue's origin and end,
And indirectly they're its secret friend;
For if all men were virtuous, true, and just,
And every heart were worthy of our trust,
Our will would languish in lethargic ease
And virtue die of plethoric disease.
Were all these villains honest, don't you see ——

ALCESTE

They would be honest villains, Q.E.D.
I know, sir, you can be most eloquent,
And make black white by dint of argument;
But all this talent runs to waste with me.
My purpose holds: from this vile world I flee.
My temper's bilious, I have tireless lungs,
And I'm of those who cannot hold their tongues;
Thus all my life would be one endless quarrel.
That is my story — you may draw the moral.
Leave me in peace to wait for Célimène.
Now shall the final proof of love be seen:
If in my desert she refuse to dwell,
The world grows dark; if she consent, all's well.

PHILINTE

She tarries; let us talk with Eliante.

ALCESTE

Not I; too many apprehensions haunt
My thought-sick soul. Leave me to seek relief
In this dark corner with my gloomy grief.

PHILINTE

That is ungracious company, I fear.
I'll seek Eliante and bid her join you here.

[*Exit.*

[*Enter* ORONTE *and* CÉLIMÈNE]

ORONTE

Yes, you must prove if by a bond so sweet
You'll ratify the love laid at your feet.
I want the full possession of your heart,
I want the whole of it, and not a part.
If your soul trembles to a lover's touch,
Why should you hesitate to say as much?
I ask one proof, and that one you must give:
My love in sole preëminence must live;
Prove that you prize me more than all the rest,
And prove it now by banishing Alceste.

CÉLIMÈNE

But why this feud between Alceste and you,
Who were his warmest champion hitherto?

ORONTE

Madam, such queries should be contraband,
When I am suing for your heart and hand.

Choose of us two which one shall mount the throne.
My resolution waits upon your own.

ALCESTE [*coming forward*]

Yes, madam, he is right, and I agree.
'Tis time to choose between himself and me;
My hopes, my wish, reduplicate his own:
Confess your love, and let your choice be known.
This dalliant coyness can no longer last,
You must ban one and hold the other fast.

ORONTE

Does your suit thrive? I would not interfere ——

ALCESTE

If yours were thriving, I should not be here.

ORONTE

In losing from the ark this questing dove,
I point no peril at your olive-grove.

ALCESTE

Nay, let it fly to seek its greening spray,
Perchance the fruit is plucked this many a day.

ORONTE

If Célimène prefer your love to mine ——

ALCESTE

If on yourself her eye one moment shine ——

ORONTE

I swear I'll not be fooled as heretofore.

ALCESTE

I swear to Heaven I'll never see her more.

ORONTE

Madam, 'tis time to speak without constraint.

ALCESTE

Madam, 'tis time to banish fear and feint.

ORONTE

You need but tell which way your thoughts incline.

ALCESTE

You need but choose between his love and mine.

ORONTE

What! do you hesitate at such a choice?

ALCESTE

What! do you doubt to whom to give your voice?

CÉLIMÈNE

Nay, truly, gentlemen, you ask too much.
Although such gallantry both please and touch,
Yet is't unseasonable. We know full well,
We women, when we feel love's sovereign spell.
Some voice, half nature and half miracle,
Some sweet monition coming from above
Exalts o'er all we like the one we love.
Yet 'twere a churlish thing to say outright:
'Good sir, I ban you henceforth from my sight;

I've given my heart away, but not to you;
I have enough for one, but not for two.'
A heart reveals its passioned prepossessions
All unawares: its indirect confessions,
Its starts, its halts, its feints, all make it plain
To unloved lovers that they sigh in vain.

ORONTE

Speak your decision, madam, I desire it.
I do not fear it, I.

ALCESTE

And I require it!
I ask an outright yes, an outright no,
Enjoining one to stay and one to go.
Away with dallyings and uncertainties,
'Tis time to speak the truth and not to please.
If still you seem misdoubtful which to choose,
If still you put us off or still refuse,
I'll know your fancies are but feather-light,
Inconsequent, and treacherous as night.

ORONTE

I thank you, sir. Were I not all a-flutter,
I should have uttered every word you utter.

CÉLIMÈNE

Was ever woman importuned like this?
I must say yes, say no, retain, dismiss,
Must e'en turn Turk and at your bidding smother
One rival's hopes in presence of the other.
Fie, this is merest madness. I protest.

[*Enter* ELIANTE *and* PHILINTE]

Come, play the umpire, Eliante. Alceste
Bids me to crown his love and ban Oronte;
Oronte bids me crown his, and cry *Avaunt*
To Alceste; and hereon Oronte desires,
And Alceste more imperiously requires,
That I pronounce before his rival's face
His own felicity, his foe's disgrace!
Tell me, sweet cousin, is it woman's wont
Ever to give a lover such affront?

ELIANTE

You might be wise to seek another judge.
Though adverse verdicts always leave a grudge,
'Tis kindest sometimes not to temporize,
And truest hearts are those without disguise.

ORONTE

Madam, it is in vain to persevere.

ALCESTE

Your subterfuges find no second here.

ORONTE

You must give way, you must say yes or no.

ALCESTE

Or else continue silent, and I go.

ORONTE

Speak one sole word, and our contentions end.

ALCESTE

Speak none at all, and I shall comprehend.

[*Enter* ARSINOE, ACASTE, *and* CLITANDER]

ACASTE

[*To* CÉLIMÈNE.] Madam, we come, without obstreperous clatter,
To settle quietly a little matter.

CLITANDER

[*To* ORONTE *and* ALCESTE.] Your presence, gentlemen, is opportune;
You also have a page in this lampoon.

ARSINOE

[*To* CÉLIMÈNE.] My visit, madam, will no doubt amaze you;
Yet since, when others blame, I always praise you,
I've come here with these gentlemen to prove
How wrong they are to doubt your faith in love.
I hold too high a notion of your soul
To think that you could play a double rôle;
I have defied the strongest evidence
And tried to wrest it to a guiltless sense;
And so, forgetful of our little jars —
Mere lovers' quarrels such as leave no scars —
I come here in exultant hope to see
Your soul washed pure of every calumny.

ACASTE

By what ingenious reasoning can you better,
O subtle casuist, this aspersive letter,
This tender missive written to Clitander?

CLITANDER

By what ingenious antidote for slander
Will you wash white, O subtle paraphrast,
This tender missive written to Acaste?

ACASTE

[*To* Oronte *and* Alceste.] You also know this hand, this style, this wit,
And have no doubt some specimens of it
In your portfolios or upon your shelves
In tender missives written to yourselves.
Here are some letters that repay the reading:

'You are indeed a most humorsome creature, Clitander, to censure me for my high spirits, and to complain that I never seem so merry as when you are absent. You could not upbraid me more unjustly; and if you do not come posthaste to beg my pardon for this offense, I will never in my life forgive you. As for our lubberly viscount ——'

He ought to be here!

'As for our lubberly viscount, whom you make the head and front of my offending, he is the last man that could tickle my fancy, and ever since I saw him one day during three good quarters of an hour spitting into a well to make circles, I have held him in very moderate esteem. As for the little marquis ——'

This is myself, gentlemen, I proclaim it without vanity.

'As for the little marquis, who held my hand in his so long a time yesterday, I know nobody so insignificant as himself; he is all starch and strut. As for the knight of the green ribbons ——'

[*To* ALCESTE.] It's your turn now, sir.

'As for the knight of the green ribbons, I am diverted by his brusque sallies and his crabbed humor, but only rarely; the rest of the time I find him as tedious as an old wife's tale. As for the sonneteer ——'

[*To* ORONTE.] This stone is cast into your garden.

'As for the sonneteer, who has set up as a wit and wishes to play the author, nothing in the world can induce me to listen to his chatter, and he bores me equally in prose and verse. Let yourself then be convinced that I am not always merry as you think, that I miss you more than I could wish in all the festive gatherings to which I am dragged in spite of myself, and finally that there is no sweeter seasoning for our pleasures than the presence of those we love.'

CLITANDER

Now I shall have my turn.

'Your friend Clitander, whom you speak of, and who bills and coos so amorously, is the very last man I should care for. He is a very silly creature to persuade himself that he is loved, just as you are to believe that you are not.

To be reasonable, barter your ideas for his, and visit me as often as you can to console me for being beset by so capital a bore as he is.'

These letters are a noble monument
To your fine taste and your satiric bent;
And lest they miss their garland of renown
We go to spread your glory through the town. [*Exit.*

ACASTE

Though time and theme invite my eloquence,
You are unworthy even of offense;
But I will show you that we little lords
Can find more faithful hearts — and find whole hordes.
[*Exit.*

ORONTE

What! have you used me too in this strange fashion,
The god of your epistolary passion!
And do you, sooth, in amorous hoodman's blind
Clap hands by turn upon all humankind?
I've been your dupe too long! Thank God, it's over,
And here I stand, a liberated lover,
Sad to have known, yet glad to know you now,
Sad to have wasted many a precious vow
Only to learn that all your gold was dross,
Yet glad to know 'tis you who suffer loss.
[*To* ALCESTE.] Sir, you're the darling now of wind and weather,
And you may wind this matter up together. [*Exit.*

ARSINOE

Certes, this is a most notorious wrong!
I can't be still, my feelings are too strong.
Was ever conduct seen as base as this?
I care not if the others win or miss,
But this kind gentleman, this constant lover,
A man of honor, worth, and sense, moreover,
Who loved you with a blind idolatry,
Should he ——

ALCESTE

I pray you, madam, leave to me
The audit of my score. The back that takes
Superfluous burdens often bends or breaks.
Although so kind, so constant, and so moral,
So honorable in friendship and so true,
It is in vain that you espouse my quarrel —
I can't repay you by espousing you.

ARSINOE

How dare you think I harbor thoughts like this?
Or that my soul desires such shopworn bliss?
Are you mad, sir, that you should entertain
Such climbing hopes in your presumptuous brain?
This lady's leavings are a merchandise
That none will covet, if her taste is nice.
Renounce these heady fumes of wanton pride.
It is not I will rally to your side.
Patch up your loves, and renovate your vows,
And be fit husband of this fitting spouse.

[*Exit.*

ALCESTE

I have kept silent while the rest have spoken
Of faith dishonored and of pledges broken;
But in my soul there is a voice that thunders
Accusingly as Jove's ——

CÉLIMÈNE

My foolish blunders,
My light caprices, and the unconfined
And errant fancies of an idle mind
Accuse me more than you do. O Alceste,
I have not very deeply wronged the rest,
But only you; toward you I am to blame;
You were no moth that fluttered near the flame,
But a true lover worthy truest love.
I know my levity must seem to prove
That I am (and alas! I am) too earthy,
Too trivial, too weak, and all unworthy
Of such a love as yours. It were but human
To hate me now — do so ——

ALCESTE

How can I, woman!
How can I hate the thing that most I love?
Oh that my reason could but rise above
The madness of this passion! But how vain
A thousand grounds for hate, if one for love remain.
[*To* ELIANTE *and* PHILINTE.] Witness the power
of an unworthy passion, —
In what fantastic moulds it doth refashion
The melting purpose. No — I am undone,
I needs must finish as I have begun;

And you shall see that hearts misdeemed the best
And wisest are as feeble as the rest!
Yes, yes, light creature, I'll forgive your crimes,
I will impute them to the world, the times;
I'll call your treasons foibles, your untruth
Mere giddiness, your sins the mask of youth,
If your repenting heart will but consent
To join me in my austere banishment.
Share the fixed purpose of my stedfast mind
To flee the tainted touch of humankind;
Desert this world, this den, this robbers' wood,
And live with me in cloistered solitude.
Be all to me as I will be to you,
And ask naught else. 'Tis thus you can undo,
Thus only, all the evil you have wrought,
And stand new purified in all men's thought;
Thus only can a noble heart forget
Its outrage, and be free to love you yet.

CÉLIMÈNE

What! quit the world before the world quits me,
To be the barren bride of solitude
Singing love's hymnals to the voiceless wood:
To have no courtier save the flexile tree,
No sweeter minstrel than the hoarse-toned rook,
No brighter mirror than the silver brook
To tell me I am young, and fair, and blest,
Fie! what a foolish dream is this, Alceste!

ALCESTE

Why! 'tis the very soul of love to spy
The whole world mirrored in the loved one's eye.

Give me your hand, your heart, your company,
The wilderness will be a world to me.

CÉLIMÈNE

To me it still would be a wilderness.
I am too young, too frail a votaress,
For such stern vows. But could you not abide
This bad world, if I trod it at your side?
Might we not still dwell here ——

ALCESTE

It is too late!
This cold refusal turns my love to hate.
You were my all, my love, my queen, my prize,
But I was less than nothing in your eyes.
So be it — I renounce you. Go your way!
You nevermore shall see me from this day.

[*Exit* CÉLIMÈNE.

[*To* ELIANTE.) Madam, a thousand virtues shine in you,
You only have I found sincere and true,
I've still admired your goodness and your charms,
The calm that soothes, the softness that disarms,
Yet let me as before still find in you
A comforter, a friend, a sister too;
I fear my spirit has been too long vexed
By devious moods, too hopelessly perplexed,
To dream a dearer bliss — I am unfit,
Perhaps — I'm sure I was not made for it,
Nor it, alas, for me! I recognize
That I am all unworthy such a prize,
And that in short ——

ELIANTE

In short, I read your thought,
And you'll be glad to know I am besought
To give in trust to this too generous friend
A heart he deigns to love and comprehend.

PHILINTE

What other joy can ever equal this?
What woe could ever cancel such a bliss?

ALCESTE

Ah! may these sentiments forever last,
And a long future crown a happy past!
But I, betrayed by all, o'erwhelmed and wronged,
I leave a mad world where I scarce belonged
To seek some spot in this unfriendly earth
That honors liberty and manly worth.

[*Exit.*

PHILINTE

Sweet Eliante, join all your prayers with mine
To wean our rash friend from his strange design.

THE END

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